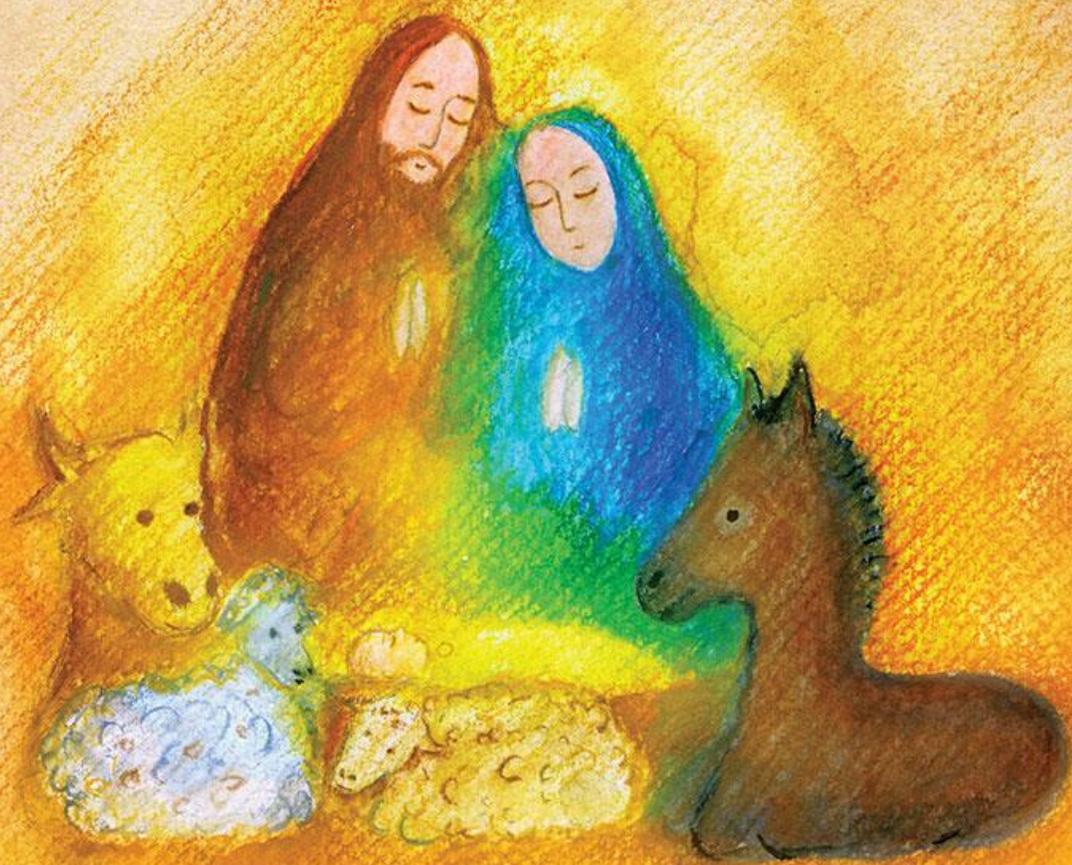


SIMPLE CHRISTMAS



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**This Advent devotional guide comes
from Keep Believing Ministries.**

You can find us on the Internet at www.KeepBelieving.com.

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Introduction

Simple Christmas.

Somehow those two words don't seem to go together. For most people, there's nothing simple about Christmas. It's often the busiest season of the year. Sometimes Christmas can seem downright frantic as we count down the days until December 25.

Because we want Christmas to be the happiest season of the year, we overstuff it with parties and concerts and dinners. Even going to church during December can seem like one more thing to check off our to-do list.

There are gifts to buy, people to see, cards to mail, projects to finish, parties to attend, a tree to decorate, music to play, cookies to bake, meals to plan, movies to watch, special Christmas services to attend, and someone must plan and prepare and pull off the big family get-together.

When Phillips Brooks wrote "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given," he wasn't thinking about Christmas in the 21st-century. Christmas may be many things to us, but it is certainly not silent.

Simple Christmas.
It seems impossible.

Perhaps on one level it is. There's not much to be done about the frenetic pace of modern life. But we all have choices we can make:

Give in to the frenzy and end up frazzled.
Or find a better way and end up in a better place.

That's what this Advent devotional is all about. We can't change the world, but we can change how we approach Christmas.

This year we'll prepare for Christmas by focusing on 25 key words, one for each day starting December 1 and ending on December 25. You might call these key words the "verbs of Christmas." In the first week we focus on preparing for the coming of the Lord. In the second week we'll think about our personal response. In the third week we'll look at the ways Christmas should change us. In the final few days, we'll get ready to celebrate the greatest gift ever given.

Each devotional ends with a prayer and a link to a YouTube video of a Christmas song. I hope you'll take time to recite the prayer out loud and then watch the video. Those two things will help point your heart in the right direction.

This year I'm going to be doing a Facebook Live daily broadcast that goes along with each day's reading. You can watch it on my Facebook page each morning. We'll archive the broadcasts so you can watch them later if you can't watch live.

If you are ready, let's get started.

Who knows?

It may turn out to be the best Christmas ever.

December 1

Prepare

“Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!” (Mark 1:3).

Are you ready for Christmas?

It’s a little early in our journey to ask that question. After all, we’ve got another three weeks to buy gifts, wrap presents, make candy, decorate the tree, put up the lights, go to parties, watch a thousand holiday specials on TV, and otherwise do the things we have to do to be ready for Christmas.

That’s a very modern way to put it.

But that’s not the preparation Isaiah was talking about. He was thinking of a man named John the Baptist who called Israel to repentance. If you read the rest of Mark 1, you’ll discover that he wore a garment made of camel’s hair (not a pleasant feeling on the skin) and he ate locusts, which you probably won’t eat at any Christmas party this month.

He was an unusual man, to say the least.

But that’s how God works. The nation flocked to the wilderness to hear this strange man telling them to get ready for the coming of the Lord.

Let’s suppose you are having a Christmas party tonight. You’ve already sent out your invitations, you’ve been getting the house ready, you have festive Christmas treats prepared, you’ve picked out your outfit, and soon your guests will arrive.

What would you do if Jesus showed up to your party?

Would you be glad to see him?

Would he be welcome in your home?

Robert Boyd Munger wrote a little booklet called *My Heart, Christ’s Home* in which he imagines the believer’s heart as a home with many rooms. The heart has a living room, a dining room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a computer room, a TV room, many closets, and an attic. Many believers keep Christ in the entryway, as if to say, “Jesus, I’ve got you in the door. Now stay there and don’t bother the rest of my life.” But the Lord wants to enter every room. He wants to enter your kitchen, your bedroom, your library, your TV room, your computer room, and he wants access to every closet and even to the “attic” of your heart. As long as you keep the doors locked, he can never be “at home” in your heart. And you will never be happy as a Christian.

The question is not, “How much of the Lord do I have?” but rather, “How much of me does the Lord have?” Early in this Advent season, before we get any busier than we already are, it’s time to do some housekeeping of the heart. We need to “declutter” our soul by getting rid of things that hinder us from welcoming the Lord.

When Revelation 3:20 talks about Jesus standing at the door and knocking, it means he’s waiting for us to welcome him once again.

It’s time to get ready. Jesus is coming!
Can you hear him knocking at your door?

Lord Jesus, I long to know you better. Come in and make yourself at home in every part of my heart. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let’s begin our Advent musical journey with this acapella version of [O Come, O Come, Emmanuel](#).

December 2

Wait

“They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31).

Waiting is not easy.
Sometimes it's the hardest part of life.

Waiting for your grades.
Waiting to hear from the doctor.
Waiting for your son to come back to the Lord.

Waiting is perhaps the hardest discipline of the Christian life. Think about a wife waiting for her wayward husband to come home, parents waiting for word from their son serving in Iraq, or a cancer patient waiting for the results of the latest test. *Waiting in a hospital is like no other waiting in the world.* Minutes become hours and hours become days. You sit and stare and idly read a magazine you don't care about and can't concentrate on. You wander down to the cafeteria to eat food you can't taste and listen to conversations you don't care about. You wait for what seems like an hour only to find out five minutes have passed since the last time you checked the clock. Such is life for all of us. Days and months and years blur together, and then suddenly time slows to a crawl and almost seems to stop.

Isaiah 40:31 reminds us that God has a redemptive purpose in the down times of life. He wants to teach us to wait for him.

We are not waiting for something.
We are waiting for someone.

Waiting does not mean doing nothing. Waiting for the Lord means, "I know God is at work in this situation even though I cannot see it at the moment. I will not let this overwhelm me because being overwhelmed will not solve the problem anyway. By God's grace I will do the next thing that needs to be done, trusting that God is at work behind the scenes."

That little step forward is a step of faith. While you wait, you do what needs to be done because you believe God is at work in the midst of the crisis.

For centuries the Jews waited for the Messiah to come. These early days of Advent remind us that though it may take a long time, God always keeps his promises.

What are you waiting for today? Do not despair if the answer is slow in coming. Bethlehem proves the faithfulness of God. He answers our fears with a baby wrapped in rags.

They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. This is the promise of God.

*Lord God, grant me gritty faith that will cling to your promises even when I feel like giving up.
Amen.*

Musical bonus: Carrie Underwood and Michael W. Smith team up to produce a powerful Christmas song called [All Is Well](#).

December 3

Turn

“Let us examine and probe our ways, and turn back to the LORD” (Lamentations 3:40).

This may not seem like a Christmas verse, but it is.

After Jerusalem fell in 586 BC, the Jews who survived realized that their national disobedience had caused the great catastrophe. The prophets had warned for years that judgment was coming if the people did not turn to the Lord. But they laughed it off because sin was more fun than obedience. They enjoyed the “fleeting pleasures of sin” (see Hebrews 11:25).

People sometimes ask, “Do you think God can speak to me today?” I tell them, “Don’t worry about it. God’s got your number on Speed Dial. He can ring your phone any time of the day or night. And when he calls, you won’t be able to put him on Call Waiting.”

We must turn to the Lord. When I was a teenager, I went to a small Baptist church out in the country to hear a pastor preach in a revival meeting. I’ve never forgotten how he explained the doctrine of repentance. He went to one end of the platform and started walking. When he got to the other end, he turned around and started going in the other direction. He said, “That’s what repentance is. You were going one way in your life and now you are going in another.” That’s why the typical Old Testament word for repentance is “turn.” Turning is always involved in repentance. It’s a change of mind that leads to a change of direction.

We drift away from Christ because we don’t repent. It’s easier (so we think) to stay the way we are. But if we break up the hard soil of our hearts, God will plant within the seeds of joy and peace.

Our greatest need is for a holy dissatisfaction. I do not mean morbid introspection or a self-conscious recital of every sin we have committed. We need a holy hunger for God to reveal himself in a new way.

Most of us don’t associate repentance with Christmas because we think it’s too much of a downer. But we all need to turn to the Lord, and not just once but again and again. We need to turn away from our pride, our arrogance, and our self-reliance. When we do, we discover the joy of desperate dependence on Jesus.

He came to rescue us from the mess we made. Only sinners need a Savior. Repentance means we finally admit God was right all along.

That’s what Christmas is all about.

*Father, free me from loving sin more than loving you. Restore to me the joy of your salvation.
Amen*

Musical bonus: In 1872 Christina Rossetti wrote a carol that is remembered today mostly for its closing lines. I found a lovely version of this hymn recorded by the Gloucester Cathedral Choir. Let's listen to [In the Bleak Midwinter](#).

December 4

Remember

“Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way” (Deuteronomy 8:2 ISV).

Did God bring you through the wilderness this year?
Don't forget what he did.

Did God provide manna and quail to keep you alive?
Don't forget his provision.

Did God lead you with a cloud and a fiery pillar?
Don't forget his guidance.

Moses told his people never to forget what God had done for them. He knew that when the Jews finally settled down in the Promised Land, it would be easy to forget the forty years in the wilderness.

It's normal to forget the hard times.
Who wants to look back on yesterday's struggles?

Moses understood that prosperity brings its own challenges. Bill Gates said it this way:

“Success is a lousy teacher. It makes smart people think they can't lose.”

That's the problem with winning. Once you think you can't lose, you feel invincible. At that point, you're about to become a loser. You just don't know it yet. You can win too much, too soon, too easily. Before long you prove the adage that it's a short step from victory to defeat. For all the problems that losing brings, at least it cures the illusion of invincibility.

Psalm 103:2 exhorts us to “bless the LORD, and do not forget all his benefits.” That's important because most of us are better at complaining than praising. Sometimes we need to give ourselves a good talking-to. We're good at telling the Lord what we want him to do for us. We need a good dose of Psalm 103 to wash out that complaining spirit and replace it with a heart of gratitude to the Lord.

We must *think* before we can *thank*.
We must *ponder* before we can *praise*.
We must *remember* before we can *rejoice*.

A good memory of the right things can save us when trouble comes.

Has God blessed you? Write it down. Think often about it. Tell it to your children, your family, your friends. Pass it along so that future generations can tell the story after you are gone.

Remember the Lord.

Remember his goodness.

Remember his faithfulness.

In these early days of December, let's focus on what God has done for us. What specific prayers were answered? Can you remember desperate moments when God came through for you? Do you recall great fear that turned into great rejoicing? Did he help your loved ones when all hope was gone? Have you seen him part the Red Sea for you? Did he destroy a few kings on your behalf? Recalling those moments deepens your faith in God and gives you confidence to face the future without fear.

Take time to remember the Lord today.

O Lord, when I count my blessings, I quickly run out of fingers, but I never run out of blessings from above. I pray for a good memory of the good things you have done for me. Amen.

Musical bonus: Today we're featuring a Christmas song with a powerful message. Let's listen to [Welcome to Our World](#) by Chris Rice.

December 5

Marvel

“All those who heard it marveled at what the shepherds told them” (Luke 2:18 MEV).

The word “marvel” means to be filled with wonder and astonishment. Some translations use the word “amazed” instead.

The shepherds’ story would have sounded incredible, especially the part about hearing an angelic choir in the middle of the night, not to mention finding the Son of God in a feeding-trough.

That’s amazing.

It’s important to understand there are two kinds of amazement. The first has to do with temporary fascination over an unusual turn of events, like the Chicago Cubs finally winning the World Series. Amazing in one sense, but not miraculous.

The second kind of amazement we might call “Holy Wonder.” It’s a kind of awe that comes from seeing God at work in the world. Go all the way back to Genesis and you discover God created the entire universe out of nothing. *God speaks, and it happens.* He takes a lump of dirt and makes a man. Then he takes a rib and makes a woman. When we read Genesis 1-2, we encounter something truly wonderful, that is, full of wonders on every hand.

The wonders continue to the very end of the Bible. Revelation 19:16 tells us that when Christ returns, he will have written on his robe and on his thigh, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

When Christ came the first time, the Wise Men brought gifts for the newborn “King of the Jews.” Gold because he was a king, frankincense because he was a priest, and myrrh because he was born to die for the sins of the world. Those “kings” bowed in wonder. One day all the “kings” of the earth will bow before the Lord Jesus Christ. They will be silent before the victorious Son of God.

Christmas is indeed a cause for holy wonder. How can God become a man? How could a king be born in a feeding-trough? How could the world ignore his coming? What sort of God comes into the world like this?

You ought to be amazed at Christmastime. If you manage to go through this season without pausing to think about the wonder of it all, then you have missed the reason we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

Lord, we long to be transformed by the wonder of your coming. Free us from our addiction to the mundane. Give us the faith of a child so we can laugh with joy once again. Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's a newer Christmas song called [He Who Is Mighty](#) by Sovereign Grace.

December 6

Resign

“The government will be on his shoulders” (Isaiah 9:6).

Have you resigned yet?

If you haven't, here's a message just for you.

David Jeremiah tells a story about George McCauslin, who some years ago served as director of a YMCA in western Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. It was a difficult situation because the YMCA was losing money, membership and staff. McCauslin worked 85 hours a week trying to solve the problems. He couldn't sleep at night. He took very little time off. Even when he was away from the job, he was worrying and fretting about the problems of the YMCA. He visited a therapist who warned him he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Somehow he needed to let go and let God take charge of his problems. But how do you do something like that?

The breakthrough came one day when he took a notebook and ventured into a forest not far from where he lived. As he walked through the woods, he could feel his muscles starting to relax. Sitting down under a tree, he sighed and felt at ease for the first time in months. He took out his notebook and decided to let go of the burdens of his life. He wrote God a letter that simply said, "Dear God, Today I hereby resign as general manager of the universe. Love, George." Looking back at that moment, he reflected with a twinkle in his eye, "And wonder of wonders, God accepted my resignation."

Many of us need to do what he did. *We need to resign as general manager of the universe.* Are you worn out from trying to help your children, take care of your parents, and get your coworkers shaped up? Are you exhausted from trying to repair the broken people and the messed-up situations all around you? No wonder you're tired all the time.

Here is where the message of Christmas becomes all-important. *Ponder the Babe in the manger.* He came to set us free from the terrible burden (and inevitable failure) of trying to run the universe.

Let the weary world rejoice. Christ is born! He can carry the full weight of all your problems, for "the government will be on his shoulders."

Holy Lord, thank you that your shoulders are strong enough to carry all my burdens today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let's listen as Gladys Knight gives us a powerful rendition of [Sweet Little Jesus Boy](#)

December 7

Kneel

“Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11).

When the Wise Men finally found the baby Jesus, were they disappointed? They might have been. After such a long journey and after the detour in Jerusalem, did it seem anticlimactic?

It might have seemed that way:

He did not look like a king.

His home did not look like a castle.

He had no scepter in his hand, commanded no armies, gave no speeches, passed no laws.

No royal decree came from his lips.

There was nothing to make you think he was a king. To the outward eye, he was nothing but a peasant child born in dire poverty.

But to the Wise Men, he was a king. He possessed more royalty in a cradle than Herod possessed in his fine palace. He was greater in his infancy than Louis XIV in his ascendancy. He was more powerful as a child than Napoleon as an emperor.

But it did not seem that way. The eyes of flesh revealed nothing but a normal baby, gurgling and cooing, moving his tiny hands side to side, reaching eagerly for his mother's breast.

The Wise Men saw beyond the present and in deep faith, they worshipped him. They saw that this child would one day rule the world and they were not ashamed to fall on their faces before him.

Let me paraphrase the words of one Bible commentator: Although we read that the Wise Men met Herod, we do not read that they worshipped him. But when they found this tiny baby, these great men fell on their faces before him.

To this baby they gave the honor due to a king.

What Herod craved, the baby received.

Kneeling does not come easy for most of us. We stand or we sit. Rarely do we kneel. Kneeling requires us to admit that we are in the presence of someone greater than us. There is no kneeling among equals.

The Wise Men offer a lesson to us today. These great men, highly respected and well-educated, having traveled so far, understood who Jesus was. God's Spirit had led them from somewhere in the east (Persia, perhaps) to a distant land, among people they did not know, to a house in the tiny village of Bethlehem.

No doubt others knelt before them in their homeland. But they do not hesitate to bow before Jesus because they understand what royalty demands.

Lord Jesus, we kneel in your presence because you are greater than we can imagine. Be glorified in my life today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Point of Grace revisits the story of the Wise Men with a song called [One King](#).

December 8

Shine

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

A few months ago my wife and I spent a week ministering at Word of Life Bible Institute on Jeju Island in South Korea. One evening a friend took us to a restaurant with stunning views of the ocean.

As darkness came, I noticed dozens of bright lights filling the horizon. Our friend said those were squid boats. Just after sundown, the pilot turns on powerful lights that penetrate the darkness of the ocean. The squid are attracted to the light, and that’s how they are caught.

Here is a good word for those who despair about the overwhelming cultural darkness.

Is the world going to hell? Yes.
But the world has always been going to hell.

If we believe our current cultural rebellion has taken us into even darker regions, then we ought to meditate on the words of Jesus and the squid boats of Jeju Island. We can’t do much in and of ourselves to stop the cultural slide.

But we can let our light shine.
We can live for Christ.
We can serve others in Jesus’ name.

*When Jesus mentioned “good” works, he used a word that means attractive. When you say a good word for Jesus, that is a good deed. When you stop and smile at a friend, that also is a good deed. When you bake a chocolate pie and give it to a neighbor, or when you stop by the hospital to see how a friend is getting along, or when you help your supervisor get her car started, that too is a good deed. It is beautiful, attractive, lovely. *It is evangelism backed up by a winsome personality.**

Jesus could have said, "When they hear your great preachers, or when they sit in your lovely sanctuaries, or when they hear your wonderful choirs, or when they read your Statements of Faith." But he didn't. He simply said, "When they see the way you live."

As our world continues to move away from God, we can make an eternal difference to the people around us. As they see the light in us, they will see the One who gives us the light. They will be attracted to our Savior and God will get the credit.

Don't despair!
Don't give up!

An ancient proverb tells us "it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." The world is dark and getting darker.

It's time to shine the light.

Lord Jesus, help me be a "bright light Christian" today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Lauren Daigle reminds us why Christ came to be the [Light of the World](#).

December 9

Give

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Christianity is a giving religion.

Paul certainly thought so. When he reached the end of all he wanted to say about giving in 2 Corinthians 8-9, his mind went back to the greatest gift of all, the gift of God’s Son. In verse 15 he says Jesus is God’s “indescribable gift.”

It means something like this. If I were to go to the bank and withdraw all my money and give it away, and if I were to sell my car and give the money to the poor, and if I were to give the clothes off my back and the food off my table to world missions, if I were to give everything I had and then gave myself as someone’s slave, I would not have given as much as God did when he gave his Son.

God can never owe us anything because all we are and all we have comes from God. Everything is a gift. Nothing is earned; everything is given.

Your life is a gift.
Your health is a gift.
Your career is a gift.
Your intelligence is a gift.
Your personality is a gift.
Your possessions are a gift.
Your accomplishments are a gift.
Your wealth is a gift.

You own nothing. Everything you have is on loan from God.

When I begin to pat myself on the back for being such a wonderful person, God bids me to look at the cross and see the bleeding Son of God.

Jesus is God’s indescribable gift. Anything I do pales into insignificance by comparison.

As you think about giving to others, I encourage you to remember your local church, the missionaries you support, and ministries that spread hope in Jesus’ name. You’ll never regret being generous to God’s work around the world.

Somewhere I read the story of a wealthy layman who loved to give money to support Christian ministries. At one point in his career, he suffered a series of financial reverses that cost him

nearly everything he had. As he struggled to put his life back together, a friend asked if he regretted all the money he had given away over the years. "Oh no," he replied, "I only lost what I kept for myself."

We give at Christmas because God first gave to us. Be generous this December because God has been generous to you.

Heavenly Father, teach us that we only keep what we give away. Save us from spending our lives building castles of sand. Make us like Jesus who gave himself for us. Amen.

Musical bonus: Accompanied by the Piano Guys, Placido Domingo sings [Silent Night](#).

December 10

Visit

“Because of our God’s merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us” (Luke 1:78).

“The dawn from on high.”

That’s another name for Jesus.

He brings the sunlight of heaven to earth. The New King James Version says, **“the dayspring from on high has visited us.”** The word “dayspring” means the break of day, that moment when the first rays of the sun appear on the eastern horizon. If you have tried to stay up all night, you know how long those last few hours can be. At 3 AM it seems as if morning will never come. And the same at 3:30 AM and 4:00 AM and 4:30 AM. But when 5:00 AM comes, you know if you can only wait a little longer, the sun will finally begin to peek over the edge of the earth, and little shafts of light will pierce the darkness.

That’s what the coming of Christ is like. He is the “dayspring” who brings light into the darkness. His coming is like the first rays of dawn when a tiny shaft of light began to shine at Bethlehem.

Search every corner of the universe, and you will find only one place where the Almighty paid a personal visit.

That fact ought to amaze us.

And it ought to move us to visit others.

Perhaps this is why James 1:27 says the religion God approves involves visiting the orphans and the widows in their distress.

It’s always easier to look the other way.

It’s much harder to get involved.

If you have tasted God’s merciful compassion, then pass it along this Christmas season. If God has blessed you, then find a way to bless others. Open your eyes, open your heart, and open your hands. The religion God approves cares for those who cannot care for themselves. It includes the widows and the orphans, but it doesn’t end there. It includes the unborn, the sick, the dying, the homeless, the disabled, the immigrants, the victims of sex trafficking, prisoners, refugees, and many others the world overlooks.

Jesus left the beauty of heaven for a barnyard birth. He left the purity of heaven to rescue us from the impurity of this world. He walked among us, lived with us, talked with us, ate with us, laughed with us, and wept with us.

He visited us in our distress.
He brought the light of heaven to the darkness of earth.
He came when we needed him most.

Let's do the same for others this Christmas season.

Lord Jesus, as you came to us in our distress, help us to go to others and bring light and life in your name, Amen.

Musical bonus: I love this lilting version of [Good Christian Men Rejoice](#) by the Wissmann family.

December 11

Rest

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Rest.

How does that sound exactly two weeks before Christmas?

If you're like most people, you may feel a bit overwhelmed right now. Our daily schedule fills up before we wake up, the hours slip away, and our to-do list seems to grow longer all by itself.

If December doesn't make you tired, you're not doing it right.

That's why these words of Jesus are so important. We need the rest he offers. We need a place where we can slow down and re-center our lives.

Few of us like to wait because it reminds us we're not in control. We don't like waiting in traffic, in line at the supermarket, at the airport, or when our computers don't work fast enough.

People talk about having their plates too full, about living in the fast lane, about running a race even a rat couldn't win. We want to slow down, but we're afraid the world will fall apart if we do. One day we'll all slow down—permanently. And the world will go right on without us.

The words of Jesus are for people like you and me. We need rest, but we don't know it, or we can't find it, or we're afraid if we do slow down, the world will pass us by. I'm reminded of the words of Vance Havner, “If we don't come apart and rest for awhile, we will simply come apart.”

Jesus doesn't invite us to a church or a meeting or an online seminar. He invites us to come to him. He's not asking us to add yet one more thing to our already overcrowded schedule.

If you feel tired and frustrated and overwhelmed right now, here is some good news. *Jesus wants you to come to him*. When you do, he will give you rest.

I can't promise you that your day will get easier, but I do promise you'll have the strength to face whatever comes your way.

There is nothing vague here.

There is no room for hesitation.

Sometimes we say, "It's time for a come to Jesus meeting." That's a wonderful idea. Come to Jesus and see what happens. You'll be glad you did.

Lord Jesus, slow us down so that we can hear your voice. Help us to stop striving and learn to rest in you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Andrea Bocelli and Mary J. Blige combine their powerful voices in this rendition of [What Child is This?](#)

December 12

Share

“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:46).

Here’s a key to the amazing growth of the early church.
They ate together.

Acts 2:42-47 offers us a glimpse of the earliest days of the Christian movement. Three times this passage mentions that the first Christians ate together. Sometimes ministers joke that if you want to get a group out, you’ve got to have pie and coffee. But a biblical truth lies hidden in plain view. In the earliest days of the church, believers ate together every day. The church that eats together will stay together, will play together, will pray together, and will grow together. I call this the First Rule of Church Growth: “If you feed them, they will come.” Thousands of Wednesday night suppers have proved it to be true.

Togetherness matters because we live in increasing isolation from each other. Our technology has made it easier than ever to avoid human contact. Look at the average family. We have our own cars, our own rooms, our own cellphones, and our own computers. We can work at home if we want, thus avoiding the messy problem of dealing with people face to face. Our quest for privacy has come at the cost of enormous personal loneliness.

At the heart of our faith stands a table where we gather to share a meal. In the early church believers shared a meal (the love feast) that climaxed in the Lord’s Supper. Christmas offers us a wonderful opportunity to recapture this ancient ritual of gathering, eating, and sharing. We can encourage each other over a cup of coffee or a quick bite to eat or by inviting others to join us around our dining room table.

In his book *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, Francis Schaeffer explains how to begin:

Start personally and start in your homes. I dare you. I dare you in the name of Jesus Christ. Do what I am going to suggest. Begin by opening your home for community.

In the early church believers were “sharing meals with simple joy” (Phillips). From a tiny beginning in Jerusalem the message reached to the heart of the Roman Empire in just one generation. It happened because ordinary believers opened their homes and said to their brothers and sisters, "Come on in. You can stay with us while you are spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Anyone could do that. It doesn’t require a lot of money or fine china.

Would you like a Simple Christmas this year? Do what the first Christians did. Open your heart, your home, and your pantry.

Invite others to join you.
Jesus will meet you there.

Lord Jesus, you loved the lonely and helped the hurting. Give me a heart like yours to spread your joy this Christmas season. Amen.

Musical bonus: I'm glad a friend suggested [Jesus is Alive](#) by Josh Wilson. We celebrate the birth of Christ 2000 years ago because he is still alive today.

December 13

Greet

“Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16).

There are still cultures where the holy kiss is practiced today. I’ll never forget my first trip to St. Petersburg, Russia with John and Helen Sergey. When the men of the Temple of the Gospel greeted John, they hugged him and warmly kissed him on the cheek. The women did the same for Helen. I even got kissed a few times. It was a strange experience for an uptight American to have Russian brothers give me a bear hug and a kiss on the cheek. But I certainly felt welcomed.

The New Testament mentions the holy kiss four times. Peter calls it the “kiss of love” in 1 Peter 5:14. It obviously mattered in the early church or it wouldn’t be mentioned so many times.

It was a holy kiss because it was exchanged between holy people. It was a holy kiss because they truly felt they were brothers and sisters in the family of God.

In the first century many of the gods of Greece and Rome were philosophic concepts, deities so far removed from mankind that no one could ever come close to them. They were like Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover—more an abstract concept than a personal God.

Into that world came the touchable God—a little baby. See his little hands, his tiny feet, his wrinkled forehead, his chubby cheeks. He nurses at his mother’s breast. She carries him in her arms. As Martin Luther said, “He whom the worlds could not enwrap, yonder lies in Mary’s lap.”

What a difference it would make if we could recapture the dynamic of the early church. Nowadays we tend to substitute technology for personal contact. We email each other, or we send a text message, or we use social media.

Here are some practical ways we can greet one another:

Go out of your way to meet someone new this week.
Get to know a family from another country.
Invite someone to your home.
Call someone you haven’t talked to in a long time.
Smile and say hello to everyone you meet today.

We are the children of a touchable God. Jesus entered our world and touched the untouchable. Let that thought guide you this week. All around you are hurting, lonely and forgotten people.

Speak to them. Get to know them. A simple greeting can bring the light of heaven into a broken heart.

O God, help us to become people who deeply care for one another. May the lonely people around us see our love, and so be drawn to the light of Christ. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's a newer song called [Baby Boy](#) performed by For King and Country.

December 14

Forgive

“Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

Christmas can be the hardest season of the year.

Sometimes we find ourselves a long way from home, and we wish we could be with our family and friends. But sometimes the distance is on the inside because we struggle with feelings of anger and bitterness.

What do we do then?

Every time someone wrongs me, I have two choices. I can deal with it, forgive it, cover it and move on, or I can drag that person through the mud and stir up all kinds of dissension.

Love refuses to wash its dirty laundry in public. Love handles it privately, it goes out of its way to veil sin, to treat it discreetly. It is the opposite of hatred that exposes weakness and humiliates someone else. Love deals with sin publicly only as a last resort.

Corrie ten Boom tells of some Christian friends who wronged her in a public and malicious way. For many days, she was bitter and angry until she forgave them. But at night she would wake up thinking about what they had done, and she would get angry all over again. It seemed the memory would never go away.

Help came from her Lutheran pastor to whom she confessed her frustration after two sleepless weeks. He told her, “Corrie, up in the church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. When the sexton pulls the rope, the bells peal out—ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong. When he stops pulling on the rope, the sound slowly fades away. Forgiveness is like that. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They are the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.”

It’s not surprising if, after forgiveness, the memories keep coming back for a while. If you refuse to dwell on them, slowly they will fade away. When you forgive, you let go of the rope, and the force is gone out of your anger.

“Call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The great good news of Christmas is that Jesus came to set us free from our sins.

Is there anyone you need to forgive?
Have you been holding on to your anger?

Are you ready to forgive as Jesus forgave you?

Jesus was a forgiving man who came to create a race of forgiving men and women.

Go and do for others what he did for you.

Lord Jesus, give me grace to be slow to anger and quick to forgive today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Many people don't know the Wexford Carol even though it has been around for a long time. This haunting Irish melody calls the listener to "consider well what God has done in sending us his beloved Son." Let's listen to the [Wexford Carol](#) by Alison Krauss accompanied by Yo-Yo Ma.

December 15

Reconcile

“His name will be called . . . Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Pollster George Gallup surveyed Americans on the top five questions they would most like to ask God. The list included the following question: “Will there ever be lasting world peace?”

It’s a fitting question given the chaos in the world today. *Whether we are talking about trouble in the Middle East or a sudden terror attack or the threat of nuclear war, we all know we live in dangerous times. World War III might break out at any moment.*

In this bloody world, peace must be made. It never happens by chance. Someone has to drag the combatants to the table and give them a reason to put down their arms. Jesus never said, “Blessed are the peace-wishers or the peace-hopers or the peace-dreamers.” But he did say, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9).

What is a peacemaker? Here’s a simple definition: A peacemaker works to reconcile men to God and to one another.

Peacemaking begins at home. It starts with your closest and most intimate relationships: between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. Then it moves to your extended family: your friends at church, on the job, and in the classroom. Only then does peacemaking expand to more remote relationships: the village, the city, the state, the nation, and the world.

Peacemaking is not an easy business. It is costly, time-consuming, painful, and emotionally exhausting. Those who do it will often be misunderstood.

Our problem tends to be at the level of motivation. We know peace is hard to make and even harder to keep. It’s usually easier to walk away from a problem. Why get involved in someone else’s difficulty? Or we try and are rebuffed or even attacked and criticized for our efforts. So we give up before we get started.

But everyone can do something.

- You’ve got a cellphone. Make a call.
- You’ve got a computer. Send an email.
- You’ve got two hands. Put them to work for others.
- You’ve got two feet. Go see a friend in pain.
- You’ve got two ears. Listen to the cries of the wounded.
- You’ve got two eyes. Lift them up to see the world as God sees it.

- You've got two lips. Preach the gospel of peace.

There is so much war, so much strife, so much pain in the world. That means there is plenty of work for you to do. Every tiny step receives God's blessing. How do you get involved in the world? Be a peacemaker!

*Lord Jesus, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Amen.*

Musical bonus: Sometimes songwriters create a powerful impact by combining a new song with an old one. That's what Keith and Kristyn Getty did in this medley of [Joy Has Dawned/Angels We Have Heard on High](#).

December 16

Encourage

“Encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

For many years Henrietta Mears was director of Christian education at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. God gave her a wonderful insight into human nature. These are her words: “Whenever I meet a new person, I imagine them wearing a sign across their chest which reads, ‘My name is _____. Please help me feel important.’”

Where should we begin?

I have three suggestions. *First, make sure you begin each day by saying an encouraging word to each member of your family.* Have you ever had one of those “uh-huh” breakfasts? That’s what happens when you are too frazzled to talk intelligently to each other. “Would you like some coffee, sweetheart?” “Uh-huh.” “Don’t forget your lunch.” “Uh-huh.” “Where’s my geometry book?” “Uh-huh.” “Can I borrow a hundred dollars, Dad?” “Uh-huh.” “Would you like a dead rat with your scrambled eggs?” “Uh-huh.” We’ve all had mornings like that. Just make sure it doesn’t become a habit. Take time to encourage each other before you go out the door.

Second, before you say a word of criticism, say a prayer for the person you are criticizing. If we criticize without praying, we run the risk of speaking in anger and saying things we regret later. But if we pray first, the venom is drained out of our words. We may even lose our anger completely and decide the criticism is unwarranted.

Third, when you feel the slightest urge to encourage someone, go ahead and do it. Put aside your work, get up from your desk, pick up the phone, write a note, pat someone on the back, say a good word to lift someone’s spirits. Try doing it for just one week. Who knows? It might become a permanent habit.

A second-grade boy was trying out for a part in the school play. When the day came for the auditions, his mother took him to school and waited for him to come out. She was nervous because she knew he couldn’t sing, couldn’t act, and couldn’t memorize very well. She was surprised when he came out with a big smile on his face. “How did it go, honey?” “It was great, Mom. Guess what? I’ve been chosen to clap and cheer.”

In truth, that could be said about all of us. We have all been chosen by God to clap and cheer for our friends and neighbors. They need to hear it and we need to do it. Let the applause begin.

In these busy December days, as deadlines pile up and nerves get frayed, a smile and a kind word go a long way.

Be an encourager today!

Father, I pray for grace to smile more than I frown. Put someone in my path who needs a good word from me today. Amen.

Musical bonus: There are many versions of O Holy Night on YouTube. I kept coming back to this acapella rendition because you can feel the power of the words. Join me as we listen to [O Holy Night](#) by Martina McBride.

December 17

Sing

“Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done glorious things. Let this be made known throughout the earth” (Isaiah 12:5).

Christmas and music go together.

Most of us can't imagine celebrating Christmas without singing “Silent Night” or “The First Noel” or “Away in a Manger.” Each year we hear Christmas music in church, on the radio, and when we shop at the mall. When we hear these songs, we can't help but sing along.

Christianity is a singing faith. Martin Luther wrote these wise words about the value of music in the Christian life:

“I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the devil and makes people happy; they forget thereby all wrath, unchastity, arrogance, and the like. Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.”

There have been many occasions when I came to church on Sunday morning feeling weak and tired. Perhaps it was because of a busy week or perhaps I was carrying a particular burden. Sometimes my mind would be going in a thousand different directions. Then the worship service would begin. It might be with the pipe organ playing “Come, Thou Almighty King,” or it might be with the worship band leading “In Christ Alone.” Or it might be singing “Like a River Glorious” or “It Is Well With My Soul” or “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” or perhaps it was a new worship chorus I was learning for the first time. As the congregation worshipped, my mind cleared, my doubts departed, my worries receded, my faith swelled, my heart was lifted to heaven, and when the time came to preach, the Holy Spirit came in great power. This has happened so many times I cannot believe it was by chance.

I love the music of Christmas most of all. On my iPhone I have a playlist of more than 800 songs. Over 100 of them are Christmas songs. I play those songs while I ride my bike, which means I listen to Christmas music all year long. It may be 90 degrees in July, and I'll be listening to “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” or “The First Noel” or “Joy to the World.” I see no reason to confine Christmas music to one season of the year.

The application of this is very simple.

Let the pastors sing!

Let the elders sing!

Let the adults sing!
Let the children sing!

During this season of the year, we ought to sing more than ever:

Sing Christmas carols.
Go to a Christmas concert.
Sing to your children.
Teach your grandchildren "Away in a Manger."

Some of our greatest music comes from this season. Let's sing our way to Christmas this year.

Lord, you have given us a new song. Help us to sing out loud and drive the devil away. Amen.

Musical Bonus: The Sidewalk Prophets tell the Christmas story in their upbeat arrangement of [Oh What a Glorious Night](#).

December 18

Ponder

“But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).

The word “treasured” has the idea of counting things up, almost like making a list so you won’t forget anything. It’s what you do at the end of a very busy day when you want to make sure you don’t forget anything that has happened.

The word “pondered” goes deeper than “wondering.” It means to take the events as you have laid them out in your memory and then to go beneath the surface to try to understand what it all means and why it happened the way it did.

No doubt Mary remembered the strange events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist. I’m sure she thought about what Gabriel said, and how Joseph responded when she told him she was pregnant, and then the amazing dream Joseph had. She must have recalled the arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and all the events of the birth itself, including the surprise visit of the shepherds. She certainly had plenty to think about. No doubt she continued to wonder why God had chosen her, and I’m sure she pondered what was ahead for her newborn son.

Pondering is hard work, which is why many of us never get around to it. And yet this is the perfect time to do it. What better time than the end of December to ponder what God has been teaching you?

Here’s a simple exercise that may help you do some serious pondering:

- 1) Set aside at least an hour of uninterrupted time.
- 2) Find a quiet place. Don’t forget to put your cellphone in silent mode.
- 3) Begin with a prayer asking God to show you the things he wants you to learn.
- 4) Focus on the Lord. What have you learned about God’s character in the last year?
- 5) What lessons seem to come up again and again? What have you learned about yourself (positively and negatively) this year?
- 6) Ask the Lord for insight as to where he might be leading you in the year to come.
- 7) Use all of this as the basis for some personal prayer requests for the next twelve months.

If you do this exercise with an open heart, God will give you insight about the past and hope for the future.

Mary pondered what God had been doing in her life. Now it’s your turn.

Lord God, help me to trace your fingerprints in the past so that I will not fear to follow you in the future. Amen.

Musical bonus: Kari Jobe invites us to join the Wise Men and [Adore Him](#).

December 19

Glorify

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told” (Luke 2:20).

What a difference a day makes.

On the day before Christ was born, the shepherds were in the fields tending their sheep. On the day after he was born, they were back in the fields once again, but this time their hearts were filled with praise to God.

James Montgomery Boice points out that the word “glorify” comes from “glory,” which originally meant to have an opinion, then to have a good opinion, and ultimately to estimate the true worth of something. *You “glorify” anything when you recognize its true value.* Having seen Jesus in the manger, the shepherds were overwhelmed by God’s power, his grace, and his goodness in the birth of Jesus. They couldn’t stop talking about what they had seen and heard.

Note where they did it. The text does not say they glorified God in the temple, though that would have been appropriate. No, it says they “returned” to where they had been. Back to the tiring and unappreciated work of caring for sheep. Within 48 hours they were back where they were when the angel found them in the first place. *Having seen the Babe in the manger, it was time to go back to work.*

People sometimes wish they could keep the Christmas spirit all year long. They speak of it as if the “magic” of these days comes only once a year. *But it depends on what “magic” you are talking about.* If you mean the tree and the gifts and the mistletoe and the chestnuts roasting on an open fire, that indeed comes only once a year. But the greater truth of Christmas should warm our hearts every day.

Would you like Christmas to last all year long? It can if you will do what the shepherds did. Go back where you came from.

Back to your office.

Back to your classroom.

Back to your factory.

Back to your neighborhood.

Back to your job.

Back to your family duties.

Go back to the humdrum of daily routine. As you go back, glorify God and praise him. That’s what the shepherds did. *Christmas didn’t change their circumstances, but it changed them*

deeply and profoundly. They still had to deal with cranky animals and sometimes they had to step in sheep manure, but that hardly mattered now. They had seen the Christ child.

Have you seen the Lord this year at Christmastime? If you have, glorify God as you go about your routine and you will find your days filled with joy.

Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see you and a heart to believe so that we might glorify you in the bits and pieces of everyday life. Amen.

Musical bonus: Not many songs tell the story from Joseph's point of view. Here's a beautiful version of [Joseph's Lullaby](#) by MercyMe.

December 20

Weep

“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be consoled, because they were no more” (Matthew 2:18).

Weeping seems out of place at Christmastime.

Why weep when we can rejoice? And yet many around us are weeping today. I’m reminded of the mournful words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Lately those words have seemed all too true. Hate *is* strong. Where is our hope at Christmastime? Matthew 2:18 reminds us that even when Jesus was born, not far away women were weeping because their baby boys had been killed by Herod.

It is hard to think of anything worse than the death of a child.
It stands as the final proof we live in a fallen world.

If the Lord warned Mary and Joseph to flee Bethlehem, why didn’t he warn those other parents who loved their babies just as much? Perhaps the only thing we can say is that God always has a bigger plan, one that transcends our deepest sorrow. He preserved his Son so that one day Jesus could die on the cross for the sins of the world. These babies died now; the baby Jesus would grow up and die later. Jesus had to escape this time so that he would not escape the next time. Seen in broadest perspective, Jesus escaped the first time so that he wouldn’t escape the second time so that we would escape for all time.

Run the clock forward about 33 years and suddenly things come into focus. Outside the walls of Jerusalem, a man is dying on a cross. He was the one baby Herod could not kill; now he offers himself up for the sins of the world. *In the end, he died too.* If he had died in Bethlehem, he couldn’t have died at Calvary. All of this was part of God’s eternal plan.

Longfellow’s next verse speaks to this truth:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
‘God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.'

At Bethlehem God struck a blow to liberate the world from sin and death. The devil will not have the final word. He cannot win because the battle belongs to the Lord.

Be encouraged, my friends. Do not despair. Through your tears, lift your eyes and look again to Bethlehem. That sleeping child will rise to battle and no one will stand against him.

Lord Jesus, keep me focused on eternal realities. Hasten the day when you will wipe away all tears. Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's Sarah McLachlan's beautiful rendition of [I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day](#).

December 21

Rejoice

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

Christmas is full of surprises. I ran across a statement that sums it up: “Isn’t it amazing that a baby born in a stable 2,000 years ago can cause traffic jams this week?”

Christians ought to enjoy Christmas more than anyone. Don’t be a Scrooge and a grouch if others get carried away. Remember, it was our holiday first.

I happened across this quote from J. C. Ryle where he speaks the plain truth about the best efforts of the best saints:

The holiest actions of the holiest saint that ever lived are all more or less full of defects and imperfections. They are either wrong in their motive or defective in their performance, and in themselves are nothing more than “splendid sins,” deserving God’s wrath and condemnation.

This is a much-needed word for a generation of Christians with an inflated sense of self-importance. Apart from God’s grace, even our best efforts are nothing more than “splendid sins.”

But if that is the case, why bother living for the Lord at all? Ryle offers this encouraging word for believers who feel like giving up because they have failed so many times:

Just as a parent is pleased with the efforts of his little child to please him, though it be only by picking a daisy or walking across a room, so is our Father in heaven pleased with the poor performances of his believing children. He looks at the motive, principle, and intention of their actions, and not merely at their quantity and quality. He regards them as members of his own dear Son, and for his sake, wherever there is a single eye, he is well pleased.

I find this encouraging because even my best efforts fall short. *Ryle has told the truth about the best of us and the rest of us.* This side of heaven, we’re a pretty sorry lot, but that’s where God’s grace comes in. No one will be saved by what they do. Our only hope of heaven is to run to the cross and lay hold of Jesus Christ. We won’t even do that unless God helps us to do it, and even then he must give us the strength to keep believing.

Do you feel somewhat dismayed by your “poor performance” this week? Would you feel better if you had been better? *Probably you would.* But we are not saved by our feelings but by Christ

who died for us while we were yet sinners and who justified us while we were ungodly and who continues to save us despite our “poor performance” and our “splendid sins.”

No wonder the angel called it “good news of great joy” when Christ was born. Let all “poor performers” rejoice at Christmastime. He came for us too.

Lord Jesus, we are amazed that you left heaven for people like us. Thank you for making a place for us in God’s family. Amen.

Musical Bonus: I hope you enjoy this spirited version of [God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen](#) by the cast of Glee.

December 22

Receive

“But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born, not of natural descent, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man but of God” (John 1:12-13).

Verse 12 has been rightly seen as one of the greatest verses in the New Testament because it tells us how to be saved. Note three key words:

- 1. Receive.** This word means to welcome a visitor into your home. To “receive” Christ means to welcome him as an honored guest and to have him make your heart his home.
- 2. Believe.** This means more than just saying a prayer or signing a card. It means believing Jesus is the Son of God from heaven and trusting him with all your heart. It means resting on him so completely that he is your only hope of heaven.
- 3. Right.** This word means “honor” or “privilege.” The moment you receive Christ into your life, God gives you the honor of becoming a member of his family.

Verse 13 explains how we become God’s children. There are three “nots” and one “but”—and all four are important.

“Not of natural descent.” *Grace doesn’t run automatically from one generation to another.* You aren’t a Christian just because your parents were Christians or because your grandfather was a Methodist bishop. Your family background doesn’t count when it comes to salvation.

“Or of the will of the flesh.” That means there is nothing you can do to save yourself.

“Or of the will of man.” You can’t pay some bigshot to get you into heaven. No man is big enough to swing open the pearly gates on your behalf.

“But (born) of God.” Here is the heart of the gospel. Salvation is of the Lord. It’s a free gift—totally free and totally of grace. It’s not a cooperative venture where you do your part and God does his.

The only question left is quite simple. *Have you ever received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?* The world ignored him, his own people rejected him, now what will you do with Jesus?

It is not enough that he came to the earth. *His coming will do you no good as long as Christ remains outside your life.* Christ may be in your Christmas cards and in a nativity scene in your front yard, but it will avail you nothing unless you receive him.

Jesus is God's Christmas gift to you. Have you ever welcomed him into your heart?

My God, I believe that Jesus is your Son who died for me, and I gladly receive him as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

Musical bonus: Francesca Battistelli offers a musical prayer for Christmas called [Be Born in Me](#).

December 23

Tell

“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child” (Luke 2:17).

Shepherds often came from the base elements of society. In that day, they were so little trusted that a shepherd’s testimony would not be accepted in a courtroom. Shepherds were on the lowest rung of the economic ladder and had little or no formal education.

That makes the story even more remarkable. After they heard and saw the spectacular angelic revelation, they went to Bethlehem where they discovered the Savior of the world in a feeding-trough in a rough, outdoor barn, perhaps a cave carved out of the rocky hillside. The birth and the revelation didn’t seem to go together. Yet there it was—all from the hand of God.

On that night in Bethlehem, outside of Joseph and Mary the only people who knew Christ had been born were the shepherds. *It wasn’t a likely way to win the world.* Certainly not the way we would have done it. If we had planned it, Jesus would have been born in Jerusalem, to a wealthy family, and attended by the high and mighty. That way no one would doubt the Son of God had come to earth.

But God’s ways and ours are not the same. He chose to reveal the news to the shepherds first of all. After their initial (and understandable) fear, they responded in faith. They believed the angel, they immediately went to Bethlehem, and they found the baby Jesus. Everything was just as the angel said it would be.

What did they do then? They told everyone they met what they had seen and heard.

I wonder if we would have been as obedient? Would we have believed? Would we have gone to Bethlehem in the middle of the night? Would we have been as quick to tell the story?

They did what all Christians should do. They told others what they had seen and heard. When you get down to it, that’s all evangelism is. It’s telling the good news about Jesus Christ to someone else.

What the shepherds did, we all can do. You need no authority, no permission, and no special training to witness for Christ. Simply tell what you know to be true. Talk about Jesus. Tell who he is and what he has done for you. Share your story and then invite others to come to Christ just as you did.

Good news is for sharing. That’s what the shepherds did. That’s what all of us are called to do.

Lord Jesus, I pray for an opportunity to tell someone about you today. Amen.

Musical bonus: A friend suggested I find a video featuring sign language. That led me to today's video, which is unlike anything I've ever seen. Watch and listen as this very gifted young man does an interpretive sign language version of [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#) by Pentatonix.

December 24

Adore

“We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Matthew 2:2).

“O come, let us adore him.”

What exactly does it mean to adore Christ? The word means more than simply approving of someone. It's much more than appreciation. Adore is an emotional word that speaks to the deepest commitment of my heart. There is no such thing as “neutral adoration.” You adore something when you see its great value.

Adoration doesn't worry about what others think. The Wise Men weren't bothered by Herod's opposition or the indifference of the scribes. Having come a long way, they intended to present their costly gifts to the Lord Jesus. If we fast forward to the end of Jesus' life (John 12:1-8), we see Mary pouring the expensive nard on Jesus' feet and then wiping his feet with her hair. It was a provocative act, one that most of the disciples thought went too far. It was too extravagant, too public, too edgy. In ignoring the customs of her day, Mary shows us what it means to adore Jesus.

The devil hates extravagant worship. What happened after the Wise Men brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus in Matthew 2? In the very next passage Herod set out to kill the baby boys of Bethlehem.

Adoration is serious business, which is why the Wise Men show up at the beginning of Jesus' life and Mary shows up at the end.

I read about a king of Poland who carried with him a picture of his father. Whenever he was called to face a great challenge, he would look at the picture and pray that he might do nothing unworthy of his father's name. Beholding his father's face gave him courage to do what he had to do. It is the same in the spiritual life. We become like what we behold. That's why a familiar carol calls us to “come and behold him.”

We come.

We behold.

We adore.

Perhaps you feel a bit overwhelmed on this Christmas Eve. You have lots to do and the hours are slipping away. I can't trim your to-do list, but I do suggest you take time to behold him. Christmas is all about Jesus. If we get everything else right and miss that, we've missed the whole point. But if you take some time right now to behold him, you will soon be “joyful and triumphant,” just like the song says.

He is Christ the Lord.
He is true God of true God.
He is the Word of the Father.

Soon we will celebrate his birth. Don't get so busy that you forget what it's all about.

O come, let us adore him.

Shake us up, Lord, and wake us up so we won't be ashamed to let the whole world know how much we love you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let's listen to a beautiful version of O Come All Ye Faithful by [Celtic Woman](#).

December 25

Believe

“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32).

Jesus did not look like the “Son of the Most High.”
He looked like an ordinary baby boy.

When Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb, the infinite God took on the form of a tiny unborn baby boy. *Eternal God added humanity—surely the greatest miracle of all time.* No one can say how it happened, or how God can become man without ceasing to be God. But that’s what the Bible teaches.

The love of God now beat in a human heart.
The wisdom of God now spoke from human lips.
The mercy of God reached forth from human hands.

God was always a God of love, but when Christ came to the earth, love was wrapped in human flesh. Jesus was God with skin on.

How big is this miracle? C. S. Lewis offers a clear answer:

The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became man. Every other miracle prepares the way for this, or results from this.

Lewis is entirely right. Sometimes we focus on peripheral questions (how did Jesus turn water into wine?) that distract us from the central truth of our faith.

We believe God became a man.
The Creator became part of the creation.
Almighty God was born as a tiny baby.

Read the Christmas story again. We see a frightened father, an exhausted mother, rags for diapers, and a feeding-trough. There he is, ignored by the mighty and powerful—a tiny, helpless baby. Immanuel—God with us.

It’s so simple that you know it must be true. Only God would have done it that way.

A young man sat in my office and listened as I explained the gospel to him. Finally, he said, “I just can’t believe all that stuff.” So I asked him, “What would it take for you to believe?” “I would believe if God came down and stood in front of me and told me himself,” he said. “My

friend, he already has come down,” I replied. “He came down 2,000 years ago and lived among us. If you don’t believe that, then I have nothing better to offer you.”

One of the verses of a famous Christmas carol says it very well:

Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail the incarnate Deity.
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark, the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King.”

On this happy Christmas day, we end our journey by declaring that we believe in Jesus because he is God’s rescue mission to humanity.

Glory to the newborn King!

Savior and Lord, on this happy Christmas day we rejoice at your birth. Thank you for moving into our neighborhood and becoming one with us. Glory to your name forever! Amen.

Musical bonus: Here’s a song perfectly suited for Christmas Day. Let’s listen to [Joy to the World](#) by Libera, the all-boy English vocal group.

Coming in February 2018: A brand-new Lenten devotional series called **Miracle Road**. Join with us as we take a journey through the miracles of Christ.

We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Advent season
with us!

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